

***Letter on Company Stores from M. F. Moran to Edward Robertson, Labor Commissioner,
1890***

WHEELING, W. VA., Nov. 6, 1890.

Edward Robertson, Esq., Labor Commissioner.

SIR: - I received your letter asking for information. You ask what are my views in regard to the running of company stores by mine operators. I have for many years been pronounced regarding my views as to the truck, or, as you have it, the "Pluck-Me" store system, either in miners mills, or agricultural communities, or anywhere else.

It has been my misfortune to see its impoverishing and enslaving work, all over the mining regions of America, and the system is regarded by all classes of workmen as the greatest curse that afflicts the mining craft. It is, strictly speaking, a relic of the barbarous ages of the past.

Wherever it exists the system calls for the severest condemnation. There is no system connected with the industrial question pertaining to wages that is so degrading in its methods as is the coal operators company store, commonly known as the "Pluck-Me." A system by which employe[e]s are in many instances robbed of from 25 to 40 per cent of their hard earned wages.

The system in existence in West Virginia may be thus briefly told. A coal operator employs several hundred miners. For the accommodation of these he opens a store, dealing in dry goods, boots and shoes and groceries. He issues checks, or what is called in mining parlance pasteboard or scrip. In order to deal in his store the miner must call at the office after a day's labor has been performed to obtain many times the amount of that day's labor before he can go to his home and sit down to eat his supper. This pasteboard is not transferable for fear the miners might buy from some more honest dealing individual and obtain goods at less price. The system as thus arranged needs but one addition to put the miner entirely in the power of his employer - an irregular or long deferred pay day. Cash payments are deferred for a month after

the completion of the month, for which the wages are due, with the exception of the Wheeling mining region, the rule of monthly payments prevails. It is hardly worth while pointing to the fact where wages are due for the month of January the miner does not receive his month's wages until the latter part of February, and we have known miners in this State to wait as long as three and four months at a time for their hard earned wages and deal in a company store. At the shortest possible time allowed for pay at the mines in this State from forty-five to fifty days expire before miners receive their wages. A miner earning \$1.50 per day or more cannot afford to wait for the pay day and is in a manner forced to deal in the company stores. The checks are only good at the company store, consequently the system permits the employer to charge him extortionate prices for the goods. This long deferred pay day secures the trade of the majority who are not willing to deal in the store. As it is impossible for miners, no matter how saving they may be, to lay aside any great amount of cash when pay day comes, and as the operator generally looks after number one there are other equally effective methods to keep the miners in this sad condition. The few who wait and receive their cash are given to understand, either directly or indirectly, that he must trade at the company store or look for work elsewhere. If miners are any ways independent in not dealing in company stores there is fault found with their coal. There is too much sulphur in it or there is more slack in it than usually is the case with the miners who deal in the store. The only way left to get better places to work in the mines is to have a large monthly account in the "Pluck- Me." I know plenty of miners in this State, who, in order to get cash to pay their dues with in the union exchange the scrip for a discount of twenty-five cents on the dollar. This system of payments can be better understood by comparing the prices paid for flour in the company store over this State and what it can be bought for in the independent stores. Flour selling in many places in this State can be purchased at from \$5.50 to \$6.50 per barrel, while in the company stores the same article sells at \$7.50 to \$8.65 per barrel. Bacon can be bought at eight cents per pound, while it is twelve and a half cents per pound in the "Pluck-Me."

Semi-monthly payments in cash is the only remedy to free the mining craft from this curse, then if a mine operator wishes to sell as cheaply as others, he will get the trade. Where the scrip system is in operation it stagnates trade and chokes off competition and generally kills all other branches of enterprise. Considering that public opinion is strongly against the company store system in its present state an effort will be made this winter to have a semi-monthly pay law passed. The prospects of the miners of West Virginia were never better for obtaining many laws that could be of lasting benefit to their interest as a craft. So far as the miner is concerned at present there is no law to give him any protection whatsoever. This state of affairs comes from the neglect of organization. Take for instance the condition of the mines in Ohio, who have good laws passed for their special benefit owing to the practical and intelligent miners organization existing in that State. May God speed you in your noble efforts to bring the sad condition of the miners of West Virginia, before the light of enlightened public opinion is the wish and prayer of yours sincerely,

M. F. MORAN, Wheeling, W. Va.